UBCM Funding Announcement

Final Treaty Agreements: Examining Local Government Interests

Wednesday, May 23, 2007

1:10 p.m.

Thank you, Terry and good afternoon. How is everyone today? [applause] Excellent, excellent. Madam President, Terry, Chief Baird, Chief Stan and all the other chiefs, councillors, mayors, Jack Weisgerber from the Treaty Commission and my colleague Minister Linda Reid. Thank you all very much for the opportunity to be here. Our time is relatively short, so there are a couple of matters of business that I would like to attend to. I should say at the outset that we are in the traditional territory of the Coast Salish people and there are a number of reasons that this is appropriate as we embark upon the discussions that are at the centre of the meetings taking place today.

I hope it's unnecessary to say this, but I'm going to say it in any event – the discussions and negotiations that are taking place around treaties at times seem to revolve around First Nation governments, the provincial crown, the federal crown and the Treaty Commission. The Commission facilitates these discussions and moves them forward. The Commission is somewhat hidden away, but is fundamentally important for laying the groundwork for negotiations and discussions to be successful at the level of government that you all represent. There isn't any aspect of the discussions and the progress that is being made now to bridge that socio-economic divide that isn't being led, in many ways, by local governments. This is definitely having a positive impact on the overall climate and the overall relationship.

You have heard a great deal, I hope, about the New Relationship; the New Relationship between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples and governments. That New Relationship, I would say to you, has been made possible by a couple of very important developments. This may sound immodest, and I suppose it is to a certain extent, but I would say that a great deal of the credit goes to the leadership and courage being displayed by some important Aboriginal leaders combined with some courageous leadership on the part of the Premier of B.C. The Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the First Nations Summit and the Assembly of First Nations came together to form the Leadership Council, which now interacts on a weekly basis with the Government of B.C., this Ministry and the Premier in a coordinated way; this is at the heart of what we now are able to refer to as the New Relationship. Very, very important.

But something else is happening and you are the cause of it. It is the realization of that statement, profound in its simplicity, that forms the foundation of the New Relationship – "we are all here to stay". You are the leaders who have given effect to that. You are the leaders who have said that when an issue arises around lands on the outside of town, at an airport, near an important highway junction, that represents an opportunity for

communities. You are the leaders who have said, in concert with First Nations, how do we make that a Win-Win? How do we work together to actually begin to bridge that socio-economic divide? How do we take steps forward together? How do we act to reveal, once and for all, that it is no longer acceptable to have a community like the Tsawwassen First Nation, directly adjacent to a non-Aboriginal community but with an unemployment rate that is two or three times higher? How do we say, stop! Enough! It's time to change that!

Treaty discussions are a big part of how we will do that, but you – the local governments – have found interesting, innovative and imaginative ways to begin to correct that unacceptable divide that are separate from treaty discussions. And I say bravo. Because whether you know it or not, those innovative, imaginative approaches to working together are truly facilitating success at treaty discussion tables. That trust is essential if we are actually going to lock arms together and take these important steps down the path of reconciliation together.

I have known many of you for many years. I dare say that your presence here today suggests that many of you have come to accept the notion that we in the provincial government no longer talk about the land claim problem or the problem with First Nations. We talk about the opportunities. We talk about how we can take hold of this new feeling, this new spirit of cooperation and reconciliation and turn it into something tangible, something real so that a First Nations child that enters high school stands the same chance of succeeding and going on to post-secondary training as a non-Aboriginal student. Those are the objectives. Treaties are one instrument we use to realize that objective, a fundamentally important instrument in our view.

That's why I'm pleased today to announce that the Province has committed $300,000 specifically to the Union of BC Municipalities to continue and expand upon the work you do with your First Nations neighbours. The Premier and I are so impressed with the quality of the work that UBCM is undertaking – facilitating ongoing consultation and cooperation. I was talking to Terry earlier about how we can take the knowledge base that has been developed as a result of intensive negotiations, resulting in initialled Final Agreements with the Lheidli T'enneh, Tsawwassen and Maa-nulth First Nations, and spread it beyond those tables. This is what I hope this money will allow you to do. I hope that you accept it as an indication of the confidence and the support that the Province wishes to show for the work you do.

We're going to introduce you to a remarkable individual here in a moment – she is the leader of the Tsawwassen First Nation but also the leader of a community that stands poised to take its place with the Union of BC Municipalities. Imagine that. Imagine an organization that has celebrated over 100 years of service now standing poised to take a very dramatic next step to where it is about to welcome a whole host of other communities. This will breath new life into your organization because there will be a lot of issues that flow from that, a lot of challenges, a lot of opportunities. But what is so remarkable, ladies and gentleman, is the fact that leaders like yourselves right across this province are no longer saying "I'm not sure I want that challenge". They're saying

"lemme at it". Lets make sure we can work together to chart a path that makes sense to the people I represent. Let's make sure we can chart a path that makes sense to First Nations. And here's an opportunity that I want to be a part of developing and enhancing to the betterment of all British Columbians.

Tsawwassen Chief Kim Baird made her first political speech when she was 14 years of age and that must have been what, five or six years ago now… [laughter] She decided at a very young age that she was going to make a difference. Make a difference for her community. There were things taking place that she didn't understand and she didn't accept. There was a difference, there was a divide and she resolved to begin to close that divide. So she got involved in treaty negotiations, became a councillor and ultimately a Chief. She has served five terms now as Chief. She has shown a remarkable ability to give birth to children coincident with important milestones in the treaty process. [laughter] Sophia is here and she is the Final Agreement child of the family. Amy is at home and she is the Agreement-in-Principle child. [laughter] You think I'm kidding? Sophia was born three days after a very, very important ceremony at the longhouse in the Tsawwassen First Nations. Ladies and gentleman, when you hear from Chief Baird, you will understand why I think her community, and all of us, are in very good hands in terms of the passion and drive that she brings to the cause of her people and eliminating that unacceptable gap. Let me end by saying this:

The deliberations that you are undertaking here are very important. As the spokespeople for your communities, it will fall to you to interpret this important step that we are taking. And let's not make any mistake about it – we cannot afford not to take this step. Never in our history has it been more important. We have an aging demographic and we need trained workers. The fastest growing segment of our population is First Nations. We need each other. This is not about any group doing any other group a favour, we *need* each other. You are the leaders who will interpret the importance of these developments to British Columbians. They trust you. They trust you because you are closest to them. You are not in Victoria, you are not in Ottawa. You are their neighbours, you are the people they look to and trust. And so I say bravo and I say thank you. Thank you for taking time to come to Richmond, to have this discussion, to pose some tough questions about what this is going to look like. I say thank you for your commitment to the treaty process and, even more importantly, thank you for looking for opportunities and for working with First Nations in B.C. in a true spirit of cooperation and reconciliation. It's hard in 2007 not to be excited about British Columbia when we see what's happening economically and, maybe even more importantly, when we see what what's happening amongst our own people – how that true spirit of reconciliation is taking root and taking hold.

Thank you madam president for letting me be here today and participating in this discussion. Thank you very much Terry.